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IX. WHEN DID THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE AND  
CIVILIZATION COME INTO BEING?

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## WHEN DID THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE AND CIVILIZATION COME INTO BEING?

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By P. VAN DEN VEN.

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No one has ever contested the fact that the Byzantine Empire disappeared at the capture of Constantinople by the Turks, which disaster effected the complete destruction of the previous state of things in the Greek medieval world. There are in the history of mankind very few events which have brought with them so many radical changes in every branch of human life in so short a period. But disagreements are numerous when it is a question of establishing an initial date as regards the Byzantine Empire as well as the Byzantine civilization.

The division of history into periods is, as everyone knows, from its very nature, conventional and arbitrary, for history really never stops, and all the historical events are so connected with one another as to form an uninterrupted succession. But it would be impossible to master the enormous mass of facts in history without marking certain halting places which correspond, within reasonable limits, to reality, that is, to the beginning and the end of a definite evolution in society, in so far as this beginning and end may be perceived. This classification has also some importance as regards specialization of historical research. Byzantine studies to-day form a special field with its own means for particular investigation, and it is of practical utility to determine the extent of this branch of learning and not to trespass on the domain of other studies. There is a risk of failing to recognize in many cases the real character of events, especially their distant causes, if the investigator has poorly classified them in their ensemble and has left to specialists in neighboring fields the care of investigating facts directly connected with those of his own concern.

The difficulty of establishing a date beyond dispute, to mark the beginning of the Byzantine Empire and civilization, comes from the fact that it is hard to find an event which sets off in every aspect of life the starting point of the new evolution of the eastern world. Politically speaking, there is no fixed line of demarcation between the Roman and Byzantine Empires. Those who have given special attention to the Roman structure of the eastern State, that structure

which remained the real basis until the end, do not perceive any beginning of a new evolution and therefore do not admit the existence of an empire distinct from the Roman. They have considered, of course, above all, the political institutions. Some who have in addition investigated the social institutions, the church, art, literature, and private life, have been led to a different view. They discover a new type of state and civilization in the beginning of the fourth century. Let us briefly examine the arguments for each position and see if it is possible definitely to determine the beginning of the Byzantine era.

The supporters of the uninterrupted evolution of the Roman Empire down to the fifteenth century point with good reason to the fact that the so-called Byzantine Empire is heir and successor to the old Roman Empire. While in the west of the empire the civilization of ancient Rome was completely destroyed by the Germanic invasions, which thus prevented any continuity between the empire of Theodosius and that of Charlemagne, in the east there were for centuries no invasions, no sack of the capital by the barbarians, and therefore no interruption of the Roman life and the Roman State. There is no break in the continuity of the long series of Roman emperors from Augustus to Constantine VII, who was killed in 1453. The foundation of the Western Empire by Charlemagne has no importance in this connection, as it was an artificial creation which the legitimate emperors ruling at Constantinople never recognized, and which in turn never prevented these emperors from maintaining, theoretically at least, what they believed to be their rights over the western provinces of the old Roman State. The empire of Charlemagne did not replace the Western Roman Empire, for the latter never existed any more than an Eastern Roman Empire existed. There were sometimes several emperors, but always, theoretically and legally, only one empire. The separation made by Theodosius in 395 between the east and the west had only an administrative character, which did not at all alter the legal unity of the State. The abdication of Romulus Augustulus in 476 does not mark the end of the so-called Western Roman Empire. Its only effect was to replace the imperial authority in the hands of a single emperor—this emperor was recognized by the barbarians who dispossessed Romulus—and furthermore to reestablish the situation which existed under a sole ruler.<sup>1</sup>

Because of these facts, therefore, certain historians reject the terms "Byzantine" or "Greek" which others apply to the Roman Empire in the east after Constantine the Great or Theodosius. They con-

<sup>1</sup> See J. B. Bury, *A History of the later Roman Empire from Arcadius to Irene*, I (1889), pp. v. ff.; J. Bryce, *The Holy Roman Empire* (1909), pp. 23 ff., 322 ff.; L. Hahn, *Das Kaiserthum* (*Das Erbe der Aiten*, Heft VI) Leipzig, 1913, pp. 82 ff.

sider it identical with the old Roman Empire, "which endured, one and undivided, however changed and dismembered, from the first century B. C. to the fifteenth century A. D."<sup>2</sup> They only consent to call it late Roman, and, after the creation of a distinct western empire at Rome in 800, they call it Eastern Roman. Prof. J. B. Bury, the foremost of the historians of this opinion, maintains that all lines of demarcation which have been drawn between the Roman and Byzantine Empires are arbitrary, that "no Byzantine Empire ever began to exist, the Roman Empire did not come to an end till 1453."<sup>3</sup> Great as were the changes undergone by this State since antiquity, it never ceased to be the Roman Empire; and if it changed from century to century, it was along a continuous line of development, so that we can not give it a new name, just as we can not give a new name to a man when he enters into a new period of his life, when he passes from youth to maturity and to old age. We designate a man as young and old, and so we may speak of the earlier and later ages of a kingdom or an empire.<sup>4</sup> Since the publication of his excellent *History of the Later Roman Empire*, in 1889, Bury has not given up his point of view, as one can observe in the reading of his recent work, *The Constitution of the Late Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 1910), where he failed to mark any distinct period in the evolution of the form of government from the time of Augustus.

Another historian, L. Hahn, who is well known for his studies on the influence of Romanism in the Greek world, has called attention only to the Roman factor in the eastern part of the empire.<sup>5</sup> He gives preeminence to this down to the time of Justinian, and he fails to show in the slightest degree the workings of any other element. He rejects almost completely the influence of the Orient,<sup>6</sup> which in the mind of Fr. Cumont was particularly strong from the third century of the Roman Empire,<sup>7</sup> and he does not appear to recognize any particular event as the starting point of a new evolution.

N. Jorga,<sup>8</sup> impressed by the strength and the relative increase of the Roman element before Justinian, does not recognize Justinian as a Byzantine ruler. During the three centuries which followed the foundation of Constantinople, the Roman institutions were translated and adapted to the Greek surroundings, and that work was still in progress under Justinian. "The name Byzantine is given to the type of civilization slightly Roman, conspicuously Greek, and 'most Christian' (in the Greek sense also), which was thus pro-

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<sup>2</sup> Bury, *op. cit.*, p. viii.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. v.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vi.

<sup>5</sup> Ludwig, Hahn, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Fr. Cumont, *Mithra*, p. xi.

<sup>8</sup> *The Byzantine Empire* (London, 1907), pp. 3 ff.

duced. The name is appropriated to the result." Therefore, according to Jorga, Byzantinism begins only after Justinian, when it takes the place of Romanism. Finlay, Gregorovius, Zachariae von Lingenthal had been of the same opinion and had believed in the continuation of the Roman antiquity till the seventh century.<sup>9</sup> Because of the lack of any racial feeling, adds Jorga, "the empire remained what it had always been, an agglomeration of nationalities, governed according to the Roman laws and holding a political ideal which had been formed at Rome."<sup>10</sup> That political ideal slowly found a substitute in Christianity." The Roman empire became more and more the Christian world, the true Christian world, "orthodox" if not catholic. Rejecting the West as Arian under the Goths, as idolatrous during the dispute as to images, as perverters of dogma under the Pope, and anathematizing the Mussulmans without trying to convert them, it acquired the consciousness of holding the one and only Christian truth, and of thus being the new "chosen people" of the Lord.

It is not to be denied that for centuries after Constantine Romanism was very strong, and the best advocate of the beginning of Byzantinism in the fourth century, K. Krumbacher, acknowledges it distinctly:

Das gesamte Staatswesen, die Technik und die Grundsätze der äusseren und inneren Politik, Gesetzgebung und Verwaltung, Heer—und Flottenwesen lag als ungeheures Ergebnis theoretischer Studien, praktischen Sinnes und reicher Erfahrung fertig da, als der östliche Reichsteil selbständig wurde; und so sehr die Griechen sich hier bald als Herren im eigenen Hause fühlten, dieses unschätzbare Erbstück aus dem lateinischen Westen haben sie, trotz einzelner Änderungen in der Verwaltung (Themenverfassung) und anderen Teilen des Staates, prinzipiell niemals angetastet.<sup>11</sup>

But, what separates Krumbacher's opinion from the others related above, is that it is not onesided; as we shall see, it takes into account the whole question, and weighs carefully the different factors which came in force in the East in the fourth century.

Bury places the beginning of the period of the history of the empire, which he calls "late Roman" and which others call Byzantine, in 395. It is interesting to note the reason for his adopting this date. "In the year 395 A. D. the empire was intact, but with the fifth century its dismemberment began, and 395 A. D. is consequently a convenient date to adopt as a starting point."<sup>12</sup> Quite logically, Prof. Bury does not take his point of departure in the history of the Eastern provinces of the empire by attributing to them a rôle quite distinct from that of ancient Rome; he takes his

<sup>9</sup> See K. Krumbacher, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Litteratur*, 2 ed. (1897), pp. 13 ff.

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 36; see pp. 33 ff.

<sup>11</sup> *Die griechische und lateinische Litteratur und Sprache* (Die Kultur der Gegenwart (Teil I, Abteilung VIII), 1905, p. 242).

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. ix.

starting point in an event which is especially important in the annals of the empire as considered in its ancient state with Italy as its center. In his mind it is not the East which separates itself from the West and begins an independent existence; it is the empire as a whole which becomes dismembered by the invasion of the Western provinces. Bury grants theoretically, in the beginning of the evolution of the "Later Roman Empire," as much importance to the western provinces as to the eastern, and his point of departure is more concerned with the destinies of the West than with those of the East. But here we find one of the weak points of Bury's argument. Practically he treats the history of the western provinces as briefly as possible, to the extent that he feels obliged to anticipate criticism of a lack of proportion. "I am concerned with the history of the Roman Empire, and not with the history of Italy or of the West, and the events on the Persian frontier were of vital consequence for the very existence of the Roman Empire, while the events in Italy were, for it, of only secondary importance. Of course, Italy was a part of the empire; but it was outlying—its loss or recovery affected the Roman Republic (strange to say) in a far less degree than other losses or gains. And just as the historian of modern England may leave the details of Indian affairs to the special historian of India, so a general historian of the Roman empire may, after the fifth century, leave the details of Italian affairs to the special historian of Italy."<sup>13</sup> This is an admission of the fact that after the fifth century the West had only a very secondary importance in the destinies of the empire; that the center of gravity of the empire thereafter was in the East. In spite of the belief in the continuation of the Roman Empire—a belief which remained the same, handed down as it was by traditions, formulæ, and survivals, and strongly maintained by the Roman structure of the state—the fact that Italy and Rome were no more the center about which the empire, its institutions and its civilization revolved, marks a change so radical and so far-reaching that it is difficult to understand why Bury, who has excellently written the history of this change, refuses to harmonize his general viewpoint with the facts which he brings out. It is hard to perceive why he declines to accept the appellation "Byzantine" so thoroughly deserved by a state which he recognizes as being so very different from the old Roman Empire.

This is another weak point in Bury's argument. When the emperors in dividing the government of the East and the West were independent of each other, or hostile, as were Arcadius and Honorius, and as a matter of fact East and West went each more and more in

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xi.



its own way, Bury defends the conception of the theoretical unity of the Empire, while taking care not to affirm its unity in reality. Have not facts in history greater importance than formulæ, which are the heritage of a past which has ceased to be in harmony with the present?

From all this it is evident that the matter in question is not merely the judicious choice of a name, but rather a consideration of the very essence of things under that name. Is the Roman Empire really the Roman Empire down to the fifteenth century, in spite of its numerous transformations? Could it have remained for so long a period the same living creature, the nature of which does not change at the different periods of its life? Did not the transformations which it underwent, in the fourth century and later, permeate so deeply that it is proper from that time on to give it another name corresponding to its new nature? Let us examine now the arguments of those who fix the beginning of the new evolution in the fourth century and recognize its extent by giving the period the name of Byzantine.

The late leader in Byzantine studies, K. Krumbacher, is the first, I believe, to have determined the various elements which have formed the Byzantine civilization, the mixed character of which differs strikingly from the unity of the old Greek culture. He recognizes four elements, the gradual intermingling of which has produced the new civilization—i. e., Hellenism, Romanism, Christianity, and oriental influences.<sup>14</sup> A great event started the whole new combination—the establishment of the capital at Byzantium (326). The importance of this event in the destiny of the Empire can not be overestimated. What, indeed, separates the Byzantine era from the Roman era is, above all, the removal of the center of the Empire from the West to the East and, consequently, the gradual substitution of the Greek language for the Latin. The first official and definite step in this course is the foundation of the new capital, Constantinople, and the second one, connected with the first, is the definitive division of the Empire into two parts—Greek East, Latin West (395)—never to be united again.

The rapid growth of the capital further strengthened the Greek character of the East and gave it a center which gradually became more and more important. The natural centralizing power of Constantinople appears in many ways. For instance, in ecclesiastical matters, at the Council of Chalcedon (451) the new Rome prevailed over the older See of Alexandria. On the other hand, following the decline of the western part of the Empire, the power of the old Roman State concentrated more and more in the Greek East. At Con-

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<sup>14</sup> *Die griech. und lat. Lit. und Spr.*, pp. 237 ff.; *Gesch. der byz. Litt.*, 2 ed., pp. 1 ff.

stantinople and in the central provinces the Greek element had been predominant from ancient times, especially among the people and in the church, and the number of people who spoke Latin had always been slight. Greek culture had always stood higher and the Greek language had always been universal. Now, by the much more powerful means at its disposal, the Greek element was in a way to gain the upper hand against the Roman element, which, growing for some time, had been weakening after the dismemberment of the West by the Germans. This Greek element was therefore called upon to take the place of the Roman element in the government of the state. This happened slowly but surely, so that in the centuries after Justinian the state was undergoing an Hellenization of its limbs as well as of its head. The change of the basis of the Empire from Roman to Greek, the transformation from Roman to Romaic or Byzantine was accomplished in the different branches of the organization of the state with varying rapidity. At the last the old system was destined to be more and more thoroughly broken down by the power of natural circumstances.

But the great place of the Greek element in the Byzantine Empire does not destroy the force of the statement that there was neither linguistic nor national unity in the eastern world and that the Greek in the East never had in that respect the position of the Latin in the West. The existence of the old oriental civilizations in many provinces of the eastern empire and the official maintenance of the Latin as language of the state explains this to a great extent.

Das ungeheure Gefüge, durch dessen Festigkeit das byzantinische Reich den furchtbaren Stürmen der Perser, Araber, Seldschuken, Slawen, Normannen, Franken, Türken und anderer Völker so lange widerstehen konnte, ist römische Arbeit. . . . Der Staatsgedanke war unendlich viel stärker als das nationale und sprachliche Sonderbewusstsein. So übernahmen die Griechen denn natürlich auch den Namen Römer. . . . So wunderbar fest und fein war die Struktur des römischen Staatsgebäudes, dass ein so eminent unpolitisches Volk, wie die Griechen im Altertum gewesen sind und heute sind und sicher auch im Mittelalter waren, es im Laufe vieler Jahrhunderte nicht ernstlich zu beschädigen vermochte. . . . Die Fortwirkung der alten römischen, nun in griechisches Gewand gekleideten Tradition im gesamten öffentlichen und privaten Leben der Byzantiner und die Art, wie die herrschenden griechischen und orientalischen Menschen sich mit der ihnen innerlich fremdartigen Staats- und Rechtsordnung abfanden wie sie sich ihr anschmiegten und wie sie mit ihr operierten, gehört zu den interessantesten, freilich auch zu den am wenigsten aufgeklärten Seiten der inneren Geschichte von Byzanz.<sup>15</sup>

Although by the foundation of New Rome and the division of the Empire in 395, neither Constantine nor Theodosius intended to change at all the Roman basis of the Empire and to give it the Greek character which it assumed only later, the developments occasioned

<sup>15</sup> Die griech. und lat. Lit. und Sprache, p. 242.

by these two events created the new evolution; and it may be said, with Krumbacher, that the foundation of Constantinople as a capital really marks the beginning of that evolution, while at the same time the initial changes may have remained invisible. We have seen that the failure of perceiving those symptoms or of giving to them the importance they deserve explains the opinion of those who postpone the beginning of Byzantinism till the seventh century and see in the preceding centuries only the old age and the fall of antiquity.

Simultaneously with this we notice other great changes which contributed to the making of a new era. In religion, especially, thanks to the same emperor, Constantine, Christianity officially takes the place of paganism, and consequently represents one of the most striking differences between Byzantinism and antiquity. A good deal of the Byzantine civilization is to be explained by the influence of the Christian religion and the Christian church.

As for the oriental element, it had always been strong in the Greek East; and the various old oriental cultures had never ceased in their influence. The provinces of the empire where the intellectual life was most developed were in direct contact with the native civilization, and it is certain that the latter gave to Hellenism an oriental character, which from Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Asia Minor spread to Constantinople and the European provinces. From the Orient came many of the habits of thought and customs of the Byzantines, many characteristics in literature and art, many elements of the court and the state organization, "wie die Auffassung des Kaisertums als einer mysteriösen Macht, der Gegensatz brutaler Volksleidenschaft und grausamster Despotie, die hieratische Grandezza, das Eunuchentum, die blutigen Palastrevolutionen und das unheimliche Intrigenspiel, der starre Formalismus im Leben wie in der Litteratur, die Beliebtheit orientalischer Erzählungsstoffe."<sup>16</sup>

There is no doubt that the political changes introduced by Constantine and Theodosius brought into action the Greek and oriental elements. Furthermore Constantine made Christianity the state religion. Another great feature, the substitution of the bureaucracy for the military organization of the old empire, is the work of Constantine and his predecessor Diocletian.<sup>17</sup> Therefore it seems certain that the beginning of the Byzantine Empire and civilization must be placed in the fourth century, and if a date is necessary, in the year 326, when Constantinople was founded by Constantine. This, however, does not mean the sudden disappearance of the old state of things and instant rise of the new condition of affairs. All that we have said points to an exceedingly gradual change and beginning,

<sup>16</sup> Die griech. und lat. Lit. und Sprache, p. 250.

<sup>17</sup> See Krumbacher, *Gesch. der byz. Litt.*, 2 ed., p. 7.

in no way comparable to the sudden termination of the period in 1453.

This argument, which was strongly developed by Krumbacher, has received careful consideration and acceptance with certain recent writers of universal histories, who have given an especial place to the Byzantine period<sup>18</sup> and also in some general works of great value.<sup>19</sup> Helmolt's universal history develops the same theory, but, while emphasizing the oriental and Hellenistic elements, it neglects entirely the Roman factor, and so presents just as inaccurate a view by completely overlooking the ever recognized influence of Rome as did the earlier historians who perceived no other element.<sup>20</sup> It is also worthy of mention that Wilamovitz-Moellendorf, in 1897, attempting to determine the end of Antiquity, places this terminus in the beginning of the fourth century: "Die Tatsachen sind da: nur wer sie aus Trägheit oder Vorurteil ignorirt kann bestreiten, dass die Weltgeschichte um 300 an einem der Wendepunkte des grossen Weltjahres gestanden hat, dass sich ein Ring an der Kette der Ewigkeit schloss, und wo äusserlich Continuität zu sein scheint, in Wahrheit nur ein neuer Ring sich mit dem vorigen gerührt."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Lindner, *Weltgeschichte*, Bd. I (1901), pp. 121 ff.

<sup>19</sup> E. g., H. Gelzer, *Abriss der byzantinischen Kaisergeschichte*, in Krumbacher, *Gesch. der byz. Litt.*, 2 ed., p. 912; Hesselung, *Essai sur la civilisation byzantine*, Paris, 1907, pp. 13, 37; J. Bryce, *The Holy Roman Empire* (1909), pp. 321 ff., 341.

<sup>20</sup> H. E. Helmolt, *The World's History*, V (1907), pp. 27 ff.

<sup>21</sup> *Weltperioden*, Rede . . . gehalten von U. v. W.—M. (1897), p. 8.